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The Honorable Henry J. Hyde
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Hyde:

I read with interest the article by Allan Goodman entitled "Keeping Secrets" that you forwarded to me in your letter of 7 October. I agree with Mr. Goodman that more needs to be done to improve our clearance procedures so as to minimize the chance that untrustworthy individuals are given access to our most vital secrets. While most of the steps that need to be taken in this area are administrative in nature, there is one legislative initiative now being considered by a House/Senate Conference Committee on the FY86 Intelligence Authorization Bill that I believe is important to improving the effectiveness of our background investigations. That legislative initiative would allow CIA, DOD, and OPM access to criminal history information from state and local authorities in conducting background investigations. I have urged the Conference Committee to adopt this provision, which is contained in the Senate version of the Intelligence Authorization Bill, and I hope to have your support on it as well.

Administratively, there are a variety of steps that we must take to improve our security system. I agree with Mr. Goodman that we should reduce the number of personnel holding clearances for access to highly sensitive information. Such a reduction will allow us to conduct a more thorough background investigation of those individuals who do have access to our most sensitive data. However, we should not take a "meat cleaver" approach to the problem by arbitrarily reducing the number of individuals cleared by a certain percentage. Instead, we should take a hard look at who needs access to classified information and weed out those whose access is only marginally justified. Concurrent with this effort, we should strive to ensure that information is classified only where truly necessary to maintain national security. By reducing unnecessary classification, we can focus on protecting that which is truly vital to our nation's security.

I also agree with Mr. Goodman that there is far too many individuals seeking security clearances and not enough

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investigators to handle the initial clearance request and, more importantly, the re-investigations needed to ferret out those individuals that have access to classified information and are a security risk. Reducing the amount of requests for clearances will help, but we also need more investigators to ensure that follow up investigations are routinely conducted.

I also find myself in agreement with Mr. Goodman on the importance of asking the right questions in conducting our background investigations. I know that our Office of Security asks questions which elicit information in a wide variety of different areas that are relevant to making a security determination. These areas include not only drug or alcohol abuse or contact with foreign governments by an applicant, but other behavior that reflects on the honesty of applicants. I would hope this type of thorough background investigation is conducted by other federal agencies and I would certainly encourage efforts to improve the quality of these background investigations. Our background investigation is, of course, supplemented by a polygraph exam which reveals any pertinent information missed in the background investigation. Any legislative limitations on the use of the polygraph by the Intelligence Community would significantly weaken our security screening procedures and I hope that you would join me in opposing such legislation.

Other steps that can be taken to improve security would include requiring contractors to strictly adhere to the "need to know" standard in submitting clearance requests so as to minimize the number of employees of contractors that must be cleared. We also need to look at the procedure for granting Secret clearances to determine whether additional steps should be taken beyond a national agency check for individuals who have access to very sensitive information.

The above steps are only illustrative of the efforts we are making to improve the security screening procedures. I believe we can deal with this problem without the establishment of a Presidential Commission, as suggested in the article. I look forward to working with you in strengthening our security screening procedures.

Sincerely,

William J. Casey
Director of Central Intelligence